

End of Story

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When I announced to my mentor that I was editing a special issue of *Folklore Forum* dedicated to the folklore of death, she replied that she hoped this would take care of my obsession with death. The first thought that popped into my head was, "not likely."

My continued attempts to analyze this fascination with death have not yielded any concrete answers. Maybe it is an attempt to understand an event I will eventually participate in, but one over which I have no control. We all die. Period. End of story. The interesting parts are the ways in which we approach death in all its phases and permutations.

There is no question that I fear death, which may be the reason I confront it through scholarship. Perhaps if I could just get a peek at the "other side" I could start obsessing about something else, like Barbie Dolls. But until that happens, I am constantly engaging the Grim Reaper in yet another game of chess.

We develop all manner of rituals and practices for that final journey whose termination is assured but whose destination is unknown. And worse yet, we have no guarantees of where our souls or mortal remains may end up. No matter what our wishes, our loved ones can do whatever they want with us after we are gone. What are we going to do—file a complaint?

Perhaps my obsession with death derives from that very issue. Long, long ago, when I was married, I couldn't get my husband to agree to cremate me when I died; he wanted to build some sort of huge mausoleum or vault in which to inter us for all eternity. We divorced not long after that and I felt quite relieved. If you can't trust a spouse to cremate you as requested, would you trust him at all?

Yet, sometimes in death we are able to do for our loved ones that which was not possible in life. In the fall of 1996 my maternal grandmother passed away. She had been a widow for around 30 years and never, ever looked at another man. My mother and her sister debated over what to do with her ashes (she had requested cremation). After long consideration, my Mom and Auntie Marge took my grandfather's ashes out of the vault where they had been interred and mixed them with my grandmother's ashes. In the spring of 1997 my mother, Auntie Marge, my brother Paul, and my youngest

nephew Josh traveled to the McKenzie River in Oregon and sprinkled the combined ashes over the water. My grandparents had spent many summers fishing on the McKenzie, and after my grandfather's death she continued to fish there each summer with her grandchildren.

All of my grandparents are dead now. On my walls I have pictures of them in their youth and I look at them everyday. I dedicate my contribution to this issue of *Folklore Forum* to my grandparents: Sam and Kathleen Levy and Frederick and Carolyn Kahn.